

OPINION: The representation gap

Written by Jordan Ash

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In category after category, the Twin Cities keeps coming up as having the largest racial gap – jobs, education, housing, health – particularly between whites and African-Americans.

After last November's election, we can add another one – the political representation gap.

The newly elected Minneapolis City Council made history when the first Somali and Latino city council members were sworn in. And both Minneapolis and St. Paul city councils have their first Hmong members.

However, it's worth noting that the seat that Dai Thao was elected to fill in St. Paul became vacant because Melvin Carter, who is African-American and was the only person of color on the St. Paul City Council, stepped down. Similarly, the only African-American on the Minneapolis City Council, Don Samuels, stepped down to run for mayor, and Blong Yang was elected to fill his seat. Also in Minneapolis, Abdi Warsame became the first Somali city council member by defeating the first and only Native American city council member, Robert Lilligren.

Although African-Americans make up almost 20 percent of the population of Minneapolis and 16 percent of the population in St. Paul, there are no African-Americans on either council.

The political representation gap is even more apparent in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, where people of color account for half of the population in each city and Africans and

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African-Americans make up a quarter of the population. Despite being the most racially diverse communities in the Twin Cities metro area, the Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center city councils are entirely white. Likewise in Hennepin County, almost 30 percent of residents are people of color yet all of the commissioners are white. In Ramsey County there are seven commissioners, one of whom is African-American and one is Latino.

This means that for the approximately 200,000 African-Americans in Hennepin and Ramsey County, there is one elected city or county official.

It is true that there are effective and dedicated African-American representatives in the legislature – Jeff Hayden, Rena Moran, and Bobby Joe Champion. But whereas the St. Paul and Minneapolis city councils have seven and 13 members respectively, there are over 200 members of the state legislature, which means that purely by the numbers, state legislators exert less influence with their agency than do city council members. Additionally, the issues that city and county officials contend with are in some ways much more directly related to people's daily lives.

Of course, elected officials can and do effectively represent the interests and needs of constituents of different races and ethnicities, and politicians such as Keith Ellison fight hard all the time for all under-represented communities. However, it's hard to believe that the lack of African-American political representation on the local level is a positive development towards closing the multiple gaps between African-Americans and whites in the Twin Cities.

Additionally, unless we figure out how to do things differently, we will continue to see one community compete against another for the same political seat. This may result in increasing the power of one community relative to another, but also may result in some communities being unrepresented and does not result in any increase in the total power needed to be able to win real changes that benefit communities of color and low-income neighborhoods.

Jordan Ash lives in St. Paul and has worked for over twenty-five years doing community and labor organizing.